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Elisabeth I: Myths, Iconography, Self-fashioning

To Olga Penke
with very best wishes "from the neighbourhood".

1. Shekhar Kapur's 1998 film, *Elizabeth*, has brought back the figure of the mythical English ruler, the Renaissance Virgin Queen to 20th-century popular imagination by recycling the theme, how the young sovereign decided not to become the wife of any mortal man, but "to marry England". The film connects this theme to two intertwining motivations: first, the celluloid-image of Elizabeth appears to be a strong, conscious and determined woman who at the same time is also shown as a feeble, sometimes almost helpless woman, struggling within the grip of the ruthless male-dominated political machinery. Her own advisors, members of the Privy Council are on the one side, and her enemies, traitors, fanatic Catholic priests, conspirators on the other. This is a pattern well grounded by the help of modern attitudes of feminism and women studies oriented scholarship, ready for consumption by a 'politically corrected' early-third-millenium audience.

In my present paper I am offering a *new-* and *neo*-historicist review[1] of scholarly approaches about the personality and rule of Elizabeth I, to see whether the film – which is advertised on the box of the commercial video edition as "a cracking thriller" and "riveting, thrilling and sexy"[2] production – is simply a postmodern fantasy made for the consumers of the products of the Polygram and Universal Studios, or perhaps we can credit film director Shekhar Kapur with the rare talent of being able to recycle history in such a way that the end-

[1] *Neo-historicism* is to be differentiated from *new historicism*. The former is a post-structuralist product 'invented' by Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Adrian Montrose in the early 1980s. On its history cf. Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1991): 13–43; Kiernan Ryan, ed., *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996); Aram H. Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989). The latter is a new, polemical approach, initiated by Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess and Rowland Wymer, being discontented with the overpoliticized and sometimes manipulative interpretations of both American New Historicism and British Cultural Materialism (cf. Robin Headlam Wells–Glenn Burgess–Rowland Wymer, *Neo-historicism. Studies in Renaissance Literature, History and Politics* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000). In my present review I do not take side, but use – critically – the methods and results of both new- and neo-historicism.

[2] The first phrase is quoted from Barry Norman's "Film Night", the second from *Woman's Own*.

product manages to preserve deep and relevant links with the historical material from which it has grown out.

Here I can anticipate my conclusion: I think that *Elizabeth* is one of those fortunate modern artworks which speak about history without turning their subject into costly, spectacular but lifeless waxmuseum scenes, however their pronounced contemporaneity does still respect the pastness of the past and does not degrade once living and integral subjects into mere allegorical or didactic shadows, either. The film does not schematize the figure of the queen more than 16th-century power politics, ideology, literary and popular imagination did so, too. My test-material for checking this aspect will be the iconography of Elizabeth, as it developed during her reign.

2. The film *Elizabeth* uses the following plot-elements and episodes to motivate the young queen's transformation – to use Roy Strong's phrase – into "an English Icon":[3]

First step: Still during the reign of her sister, 'Bloody Mary', Elizabeth is implicated in the Thomas Wyatt conspiracy and is sent to the Tower. The seriously ill Mary wants to see her, and in a weak moment she asks her: "Promise me something. When I will be gone and you will do everything in your power to oppose the Catholic faith, do not take away from the people the consolation of the Virgin Mary..." After a moment of suspense, Elizabeth answers: "When I am queen, I promise, to act as my conscience dictates".[4] This scene prepares that historical motive of the film which is based on the notion, that the almost religious cult of Elizabeth that developed by the 1570s was to substitute the cult of the Virgin Mary from which the English people were deprived by the Reformation.[5]

Second step: From the outset of the reign, William Cecil (the later Lord Burghley) keeps on urging Elizabeth to get married and produce an heir to the throne, otherwise her rule remains weak and prey to agressive ambitions. At one instance the film shows old Cecil (who – played by Richard Attenborough – is in fact much older than his historical counterpart) rambling among the maids of

[3] Cf. Roy Strong, *The English Icon. Elizabethan and Jacobean Portraiture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969). See also Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977).

[4] Shekhar Kapur dir., *Elizabeth*, Polygram and Universal Studios, 1999, real time 0:17.

[5] On the effect of the Reformation on the people's relation to rites and magic see Keith Thomas's monumental *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971). On Elizabeth as a substitute for the Virgin Mary see Helen Hackett's comprehensive monograph *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen. Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Macmillan, 1996) and those historical works by which Hackett's study were prompted: E. C. Wilson, England's Eliza (1933, New York: Octagon, 1966); Frances A. Yates, *Astreae: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1975), and Roy Strong's cited monographs (1969 and 1977).

honour and asking them to show him every morning the Queen's sheets, that "he could know about all her 'proper functions'". Responding to the gigglings of the maids, he becomes deadly serious: "Her Majesty's body and person are no longer her own property. They belong to the State".[6]

Third step: As if in answer to Cecil's repeated remarks about Elizabeth's vulnerability resulting from her female sex, at one point Elizabeth bursts out: "I have chosen to have the heart of a man. I am my father's daughter".[7]

Fourth step: The last but one scene of the film takes place in a chapel where – in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary – Elizabeth and Sir Francis Walsingham (her later Secretary of State) are talking. While looking at the statue Elizabeth says, "She had such power on men's hearts. They died for her." Walsingham's reply seems to be the catalyzer of the conclusion of the film: "They have found nothing to replace her." So, Elizabeth decides to replace the Virgin Mary for the people. A ritualistic (and iconographical) transformation follows, breaking with her past, with her youth. Elizabeth's hair is cut and she is dressed in such a robe which generates the 'English Icon', resembling the iconographical representations of Mary. No wonder, Elizabeth herself is surprised to see the result: "God, I have become a virgin", she says. Then she turns to Lord Burghley who is standing among the overwhelmed crowd of courtiers: "Observe, I am married to England".[8]

3. The film of course handles quite liberally the actual historical events: reshuffles chronology, condenses long sequences of time, this is especially true about the presentation of Norfolk's revolt and his fall. A suitable analogy is Shakespeare's approach to English history in his chronicle plays: everybody knows that things did not happen exactly as he represented them on the stage, still the plays convey an authentic historical vision. One of the privileges of artworks is to master a framework in which history is presented: certain themes are highlighted and their logic remoulds the (hi)story into plot. In fact, as we know from Hayden White, turning story to plot is often a great temptation for professional historians, too.

These highlighted themes of *Elizabeth*, the film, are nevertheless in harmony with what we know from other sources about the Virgin Queen. Her integral femininity, her reluctance to get married, her struggle with the sourrounding male political machinery and her conscious choice to remodel herself into a sacred figure all can be found in the historical source materials and all constitute parts of the argumentation of modern scholars. Historians, of course, see the above themes in significantly more complex ways than the film which simpli-

[6] *Elizabeth*, real time 0:39.

[7] *Elizabeth*, real time 1:33.

[8] *Elizabeth*, real time 1:49-50.

fies, condenses and offers schematic presentations. In the present concise essay I would like to show this in connection with two motives: first by looking at Elizabeth's self-fashioning as she chose to remain unmarried, and secondly by reflecting on the social-ideological process of her transformation into a sacral figure.

In the film the self-fashioning motive is straightforward: her reluctance to get married becomes an explicite *choice* which is motivated by the constraints of politics and the recognition that the people need a substitute for the Virgin Mary. As opposed to this scheme, historians have unearthed a great variety of possible stimuli, the most important of these are as follows:

Since it was quite inconceivable even for contemporaries that a Queen would not marry and thus neglect one of her supreme duties in producing an heir, historians have pondered that the Queen may have suffered some physical impediment to intercourse, perhaps syphilis made her infertile. By now these views have been dismissed.[9]

Probably not the most decisive, but logically the next aspect is to look at Elizabeth's psychology and her childhood / adolescence experiences. As we know, she was the daughter of Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn, who was arrested in 1536 and executed upon the charges of multiple adultery with, among others, her own brother. Elizabeth was at that time three and from then on she could experience the fluctuating fortunes of her stepmothers: Jane Seymour died of childbirth, Anne of Cleves was abandoned because Henry had become tired of her, Katherine Howard was also executed because of alleged adultery in 1542 – Elizabeth was then eight and a half. With the next stepmother, Katherine Parr, the young princesse had close and warm relationship, at least until her father's death, because months after Henry's passing away Parr passionately married Sir Thomas Seymour a reckless womanizer, who also had an eye on the dazzling teenager. Finally Parr asked Elizabeth to leave her home, but when she died in childbirth a year later, Seymour continued to pursue the princesse. Such a marriage would have been considered incestuous and the rumours about them already damaged the reputation of Elizabeth. She repeatedly tried to be officially cleared by the Lord Protector, Edward Seymour, but – probably because the two Seymours were brothers – in vain.

After 1553, the death of Edward VI, Elizabeth's life became openly endangered. Since there was no male heir, the possibility of woman rule became imminent. Henry's first child, Mary became queen with popular support, but there were opposing factions. The Duke of Northumberland (the *nouveau riche* John Dudley, father of Robert, the later Earl of Leicester) supported a Tudor cousin, Lady Jane Grey, who was even forced to marry one of the Duke's sons, but soon

[9] Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony. The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4, 220 n° 15.

ended on the scaffold. The Protestant party then favoured Elizabeth, and after she was implicated in the Thomas Wyatt Jr. conspiracy triggered by Mary's marriage to the Catholic Philip of Spain, she was sent to the Tower, only narrowly escaping execution like her cousin, Lady Jane.[10]

Some historians claim, that these experiences were enough to turn the young girl pathologically dreaded of marriage and damaged as a human being. Based on Freudian psychoanalysis, for example Larissa Taylor-Smither has suggested that Elizabeth suffered all her life from an "irresolution of the Oedipal complex".[11] This view is seemingly corroborated by Robert Dudley's recollection, according to which Elizabeth at the age of eight had told him that she would never marry.[12]

William Camden, the historian of Elizabeth turned this theme into a political myth when he included in his *The True and Royall History of the Famous Empresse Elizabeth* (1625) a speech supposedly delivered by Elizabeth in 1559, when a parliamentary delegation visited her with the request to get married:

> Now, that the publick Care of governing the Kingdom is laid upon me, to draw upon me also the Cares of Marriage may seem a point of inconsiderate Folly. Yea, to satisfie you, I have already joyned my self in Marriage to an Husband, namely, the Kindgom of England.[13]

John N. King has clarified, however, that the above speech is by and large forgery and that Elizabeth did not take an oath to remain unmarried at that stage of her rule.[14] In fact, time and again she spoke of prospects of getting married, although she also repeatedly emphasized her preference for a celibate life. According

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[10] The above historical summary is based on Carole Levin, *"The Heart and Stomach of a King". Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), and Neville Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971); Neville Williams, *All the Queen's Men. Elizabeth I and Her Courtiers* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972). The latter two include extensive and helpful genealogical tables.

[11] L. J. Taylor-Smither, "Elizabeth I: A Psychological Profile," *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* 15 (1984): 47–70. Cited by Doran 1996, 5–6. As Taylor-Smither's argument ran, Elizabeth was ridden by extreme guilt because had she been born a boy, her mother would have been spared and she herself would have remained her father's favourite. As a consequence, she came to the conviction that "maleness mattered" and she developed a "masculine identification".

[12] Levin 1994, 176 n° 11 cites Alison Plowden, *Marriage with My Kingdom: The Courtships of Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Stein & Day, 1977), 25.

[13] Camden's *History* is quoted from Doran 1996, 2.

[14] John N. King, "Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen," *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 33 (30–74), *also King, Tudor Royal Iconography: Literature and Art in an Age of Religious Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

to other historians, her policy about marriage was a conscious and calculated response "to practical problems of being a female ruler".[15] These practical problems and Elizabeth's related deliberations have been carefully analyzed in Carole Levin's book, the title of which was chosen from one of the Queen's speeches delivered in a moment of crisis, before the invasion of the Spanish Armada: "I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king".[16] In the book Levin demonstrates that Elizabeth consciously blurred the demarcation between the male and female genders, as well as the iconography of King or Queen. This, by the way, was in considerable harmony with the ideals and expectations of her subjects, including the chief policy makers.

Concluding the question of deliberate self-fashioning as a Virgin Queen, Susan Doran argues that "Elizabeth did not reject marriage from either psychological motives or political reasons associated with her gender".[17] She clearly wanted to get married on two occasions: when Robert Dudley's first wife died in 1560 – although the rumours about Dudley having murdered Amy Robsart made her desire politically impossible; and she also seriously considered the 'Alancon Match' in 1579–81, as her famous Petrarchist poem, "On Monsieur's Departure" testifies.[18]

It is more reasonable to say, that once it happened that Elizabeth remained unmarried, she deliberately started playing a role and develop an image, in order to fully exploit the situation. Certainly this choice was not a simple private initiative but wholly intertwined with the complex political and ideological realities of the times. No wonder, that her councillors also played active part in creating and disseminating those cultural representations which contributed to her transformation into a sacred monarch.

Coming to my second theme now, there is only time to quickly survey how manifold and complex those myth-generating and maintaining forces were which are boiled down in the film *Elizabeth* to the 'people's need' for a substitute Virgin Mary.

To begin with, the very institution of medieval and early modern concepts of monarchy presupposed a sacred aura around the 'King's Two Bodies', as we know from the studies of Ernst Kantorowicz.[19] The ruler's public body was anointed,

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[15] Doran 1996, 6 – citing Joel Hurstfield's Elizabeth I and the Unity of England (London: The English University Press, 1960) and Susan Bassnet's Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective (Oxford: Berg, 1988).

[16] Cf. Levin 1994, 1, 57, 190 n° 43.

[17] Doran 1996, 11.

[18] Cf. my paper, "Cross-dressing the Tongue: Petrarchist Discourse and Female Voice in Queen Elizabeth's Song", *HJEAS* 10.2 (2005).

[19] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

God-like, a patriarchal father-figure. When it came to a woman sitting on the throne, the situation became complicated, the imagery and its connotations became richer. We can see in the case of Elizabeth, that she herself as well as her councillors often represented her as a King or Prince, generating the mighty father-image; on other occasions her femininity, either as a holy Virgin, or as a nurturing mather-figure became emphasized.

These myth-generating cultural representations of Elizabeth can be arranged into the following typology: 1/ as a sacred monarch – comprising both Catholic and Protestant iconography with Old Testament as well as New Testament elements. 2/ As a pagan Goddess, such as Diana, Cynthia, Phoebe, or Astraea – this imagery was the result of Renaissance courtly culture, especially Petrarchist poetry, but often contaminated with political and religious terminology. 3/ Neo-medieval chivalric imagery: since Elizabeth herself was fond of the revived chivalric traditions, such as tournaments in the tiltyard, she quite naturally acquired allegorical personalities related to this cultural lore, such as 'The Faery Queen', 'Gloriana', or, as in Spenser's great epic, the masculine, still tender amazonic female knight, Britomartis.

In different periods of her long, forty-five-year rule, the above listed complex of cultural representations appeared with different emphases. At the beginning it was more a Protestant, Old Testament iconography that was attached to her. She was compared to Deborah, or Judith, both being married but valiant heroines. Helen Hackett has pointed out the obvious difficulties with the simplified view that Elizabeth "as the Virgin Queen of Protestantism, came to be indentified symbolically with the Virgin Mary" – as stated by Dorothy Connell and many recent historians.[20] But how, asks Hackett, "could the Supreme Governor of a Church which had expelled icons of the Virgin as idolatrous be herself idolised as a pseudo-Marian icon?" Hereafter Hackett warns that the question can only be answered correctly if one contextualizes according to time, place and class (meaning a/ when during her rule such notions and images were used?; b/ where they were used – at court, in Parliament, city, or country?; c/ by whom were they used – nobility, clergy, politicians, poets, or produced by popular imagination?). The professed program in her book, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen* is "to look beyond the assertion of a uniform national psychological need for a symbolic virgin-mother figure, to situate examples of the magnification of Elizabeth in relation to some specific political circumstances; and to locate changes in those

[20] Hackett 1996, 7ff. Hackett also cites for similar views Jean Wilson's *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980), 21; Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 168; Lisa Jardin's *"Still Harping on Daughters": Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1983), 177–8; etc.

circumstances which produced changes in iconography, bringing it closer to the cult of the Virgin at certain times than others."[21]

Instead of a full survey I would like to illustrate the manifold nature of Elizabethan iconography by two images of anonymous authorship.[22] On the first she is depicted in such a pose which indeed reminds the viewer of traditional Virgin Mary iconography. On the second one, the allegorized Elizabeth as a medieval knight is bringing Truth into daylight from a dark cave where she had been imprisoned. Beyond the obvious moral meaning this latter image also bears resemblance to the chivalric attitudes of the virgin queen.

At this point I cannot continue my review of scholarly debates about the myths and cultural symbolization of Tudor Elizabeth. I would like to stress, however, that these images, no doubt, are schematic and simplifying, highlighting in an allegorical or emblematic manner just one or another concept, desire, association. Like the film, Elizabeth which successfully condensed the complexity of past life into two or three powerful themes.

[21] Hackett 1996, 11.

[22] 1. «Elizabeth I in Coronation Robe.» Artist Unknown. National Portrait Gallery, London. Reproduced from: Hackett 1995, title page ; 2. T. Cecill, «Truth Presents Elizabeth with Lance.» Reproduced from: *Edmund Spenser: The Illustrated Faerie Queene* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1980), 82.